**Psalm 146
James 3.1-12
15th September 2024**

## Words can bless or curse

Last month I had the privilege of taking a wedding here at AFC.

Getting married is a big deal yet it struck me that afternoon that one of the most profound promises we ever ask anyone to make is done so with an elegant economy of words. No T’s and C’s are mentioned, no long legal paragraphs are signed, but in answer to the question *Will you take this man or woman as your husband or wife,* we all eagerly wait for the simple, yet life changing response, *I do.* Two words that give us a new identity.

Edward Bulwer Lytton was one of those Victorian All Rounders, and as well as being a politician he was also a playwright. In 1839 he published a play that extolled the virtue of words above violence in world affairs, it had in it the now much used line *The pen is mightier than the sword.* A phrase so respected that it was printed above the entrance to the new Library of Congress in Washington in 1897.

Words are, of course, double edged because they can either bless or curse.

The letter of James in our New Testaments is considered to be one of the most practical and down to earth books in the bible. It’s essentially about how we live, so naturally, chapter 3 has much to say about how we talk.

James uses a metaphor even a non-sailor or horse rider can grasp. The tongue, he says, may be relatively small, but just like a boat’s rudder or the bit in a horse’s bridle it has great influence to steer and control.
There is, of course, a continuum here that follows on from the teaching of Jesus in the gospels.

The first century world of both James and Jesus valued oratory in public places. Today we might turn to our hand-held devices, however in those days you tuned in to the preacher at the synagogue or the speaker in the market square. News, teaching, ideas and debate all needed words. Words that both James and Jesus said could either be a blessing or a curse.

In today’s reading the question is asked *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?* Jesus, in his teaching asked a similar question about whether a tree could, at the same time, produce both good fruit and bad. Both gospel and epistle, therefore, challenge us with the idea that what we say is a reflection of who we are. Our words, as it were, reveal our soul. What comes out of our mouth first starts off in our hearts.

The Jewish Scripture’s Book of Proverbs, appropriately enough, plays with words even as it talks of the way we use them.

For example: *The words of the righteous are a fountain of life, the speech of the wicked conceals violence…When there is too much talk, offence is never far away, the prudent hold their tongue…*or how about…*One who minds his words preserves his life, yet one who talks too much faces ruin.*Lots of possibilities there for a calligrapher making greetings cards!

I think we in church really value the words we say, sing and pray. A lot of thought goes into the writing of liturgy and hymns because these words are so important.

The words we use in church, especially the ones about God, do at least two vital things. They describe God’s character – we say a God of Love, or a God of Light, and they also describe God’s mission, to share that Love and spread that Light. And all the time our prayer is that something of God’s character and mission will become our mission and character too.

That’s why the words we use in church are so precious; they describe God and the mission of God in which we are invited to share.

James, of course, is a down to earth realist who comes across as a wise observer of people. He can read his congregation and therefore lands a hard truth by invoking impactful euphemisms. So, he acknowledges that words can bring both blessings and curses. Our words can be toxic. He says they can pollute or be as destructive as a wildfire.

Many years ago some friends of mine lost their teenage daughter to cancer. Some of her friends from church used to visit her and they thought that was a good thing. Imagine their sadness when they read their daughter’s diaries after her passing in which she had written that these friends, during their visits, told her she didn’t have enough faith, because if she had she would have been healed.

At best their words were confused if well intentioned, at worst their words showed an inappropriate judgmental spirit based on spurious theology. Either way, these visits had brought pain. Words that might have brought blessing offered cursing instead.

Pray God such experiences are rare. Much more common are moments when we *open our mouth and put our foot in it.* Maybe we break a confidence or express a badly thought through opinion. Sometimes we might even want to say something positive, perhaps to a bereaved friend maybe, yet we become flustered and come away annoyed with ourselves for thinking we’ve said the wrong thing.

Teachers and Preachers often use the illustration of a tube of toothpaste. Words are like toothpaste, once squeezed out of the tube, it’s virtually impossible to put it back in.

Yet James isn’t looking for perfection here. He knows we can put our foot in and says: *All of us go wrong again and again…*We’re all, as they say, a work in progress. What matters is our awareness that words truly matter. And such an understanding has never been more important with the growth of Fake News and AI, currently developing at the Speed of Light.

Words used well, that are backed up by good actions, create trust and community. Words used duplicitously, hiding ill intent, create suspicion and bring about division.

From government announcements to family relationships, words matter.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor theologian who lost his life in Hitler’s evil regime, used to run an Underground Seminary in Finkenwalde, and it’s said he had this rule for all his students that none of them should speak negatively about a fellow student in their absence, and if they did they should then tell that students what they said.

I think that was Bonheoffer saying speech is, in a way, sacred and that part of his students training was not just about what these ordinands read but the way they spoke, especially of colleagues.

At the heart of such an understanding is the central truth held by the Judaeo/Christian tradition that human beings are made in the Image of God. So, the way I treat you needs to reflect the idea that God’s image is within both of us and that the Holy Spirit creatively fills in the space between us.

Perhaps we have had no better teacher of this theological foundation principle than Mother Theresa who taught her nuns to go out onto the streets, often straight after the Morning Eucharist, and in greeting the sick and the poor see in them the face of Jesus. Her way of honouring that we are all made in the image of God.

Words that bless.
Words that curse, and finally,
Words that motivate.

Because we need to connect action to speech and that rescues us from being *so heavenly minded that we become of no earthly use.*When Jesus showed an enquirer the way of compassion, he often brought their encounter to a conclusion with the phrase *Go and DO likewise.* For our Lord words and action always belonged together.

So, using an ancient understanding of the Greek word Logos, Jesus is described in the New Testament as the Word, God’s Word for us. Logos, in those far off days was a semi sacred term that meant wisdom and reason. Yet those first century Christians viewed the Jesus they were following as The Word made Flesh. God living amongst us, incarnate in Jesus.

So, God’s revelation, they believed, came to them not in just the teachings but also via the mission of this Jesus. For Jesus shows us, they and we believe, the character of God in human actions. Actions of love, compassion and kindness, alongside words that inspire and teach us about justice, hope and renewal.

There is this holy, God breathed blending of words with actions in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ which becomes for us our guiding inspiration in the way we seek to live.

So, this week James encourages us all to be aware of the toxicity of talk and replace it, instead, with words and actions that affirm and build up.

Words that bless instead of curse. Words like: *welcome, thank you, bless you, love you.*

Perhaps I could end this sermon with a prayer preachers usually offer at the beginning of their talk. It’s a verse from Psalm 19: *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

 *Ian Green, Amersham, 9th September 2024*